

STARS BLINDLY RUN: two pieces for atheists

Track 1 Stars Blindly Run

This album is a remix of two items which formed part of the album of the same name that I issued in 2016. I decided to separate them out to give a more coherent words and music project.

In the past composition for religious purposes was a fundamental strand of musical activity. Even today, such music is an important form of expression for many composers.

But for me this has never been so, as in such matters I have always taken an atheist and materialist view. I have written a few pieces of a religious nature, which I have not found a problem. I am happy to draw on the myths of the Ancient Greeks or the folk culture, and find the Christian narrative equally strong in suggesting starting points and perspectives. One such was a work by Alfred (Lord) Tennyson.

In 1849 he completed *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, a poem written over sixteen years in response to the sudden death in Vienna in 1833 of his close friend Arthur Hallam.

In Memoriam is written in four-line stanzas, made up of iambic tetrameters rhyming ABBA. These in turn are grouped into 133 cantos, dealing with a wide range of reflections.

The poem is long and on the whole depressing, but had interested me for many years, from when I had to study it for A Level. It was not attractive to my fellow students, or even, I believe to the teacher. But at the time it had particular relevance, since I was returning to study after a bout of TB.

Tennyson was the son of a Lincolnshire clergyman. The death of Hallam was a severe test to his faith, and the original title of the poem was 'The Way of the Soul'. Finally, Tennyson found an essentially Christian accommodation to his grief. However, to reach this point he had to face issues such as the cruelty of nature, mortality and the claims of materialist science.

It is my belief that had he not been able to do this, the work could easily have been self-indulgent and second-rate. But he faces these matters without evasion.

In doing so, he produced what is arguably the finest poetry in the work, and certainly the most well-known (for example the passage about "nature, red in tooth and claw").

It occurred to me that, ironically, Tennyson, the Christian, had produced one of the finest literary evocations of my own, atheist position. I have never adhered to any religion, and am sceptical of or reject many of its claims. I see the Universe in materialist terms, full of randomness, and certainly not arranged to reflect human wishes and aspirations.

I therefore took relevant extracts as my starting point. It is important that religious people or lovers of Tennyson should understand that I am not trying to give a balanced and accurate interpretation of *In Memoriam* as Tennyson saw it, but am instead taking extracts to create what is an evocation in sound of an atheist view.

Technically I draw on electronic and dance inspirations, but above all on Paul Lansky's approach in his *Six Fantasies on a Poem* by Thomas Campion. In that work he recorded an actor, his wife, Hannah

MacKay, reading the poem. He then used electronic resources to give a staggeringly imaginative range of sounds, all derived from that reading.

In particular, I was struck by the insight that speech uses vowels, which are voiced sounds. This means that they have pitches. The speech can be drawn out into a song, the movement of which is led by the speaker's unconscious use of rises and falls in the voice.

In fact Frances, the reader, did also record sung versions of a theme I had created for *Ring Out Wild Bells*, which I again treated electronically to produce a range of sung passages.

The original album included instrumental pieces created with a strong contrapuntal element, that is, the use of musical lines ('voices') which have distinct rhythms which interact. These may be deployed in *imitation*, which is the repetition of a line or phrase shortly after its appearance in a different line. We are all familiar with rounds such as *Frere Jacques*; the round is a compositional form which uses imitation. In *Stars Blindly Run* not only musical notes, but also the sounds and at times the words are used imitatively.

In addition I created a short fugue, parts of which can be heard at various points. A fugue is a contrapuntal form. It is built on a subject (a short theme) that is introduced at the beginning. Imitation is used to introduce the theme in all the voices. A contrasting theme (the countersubject) is usually added. This part of the piece is called the exposition. The theme is then given a development, before the original ideas return.

The extracts don't follow the order in which they appear in the poem. I feel that I can live with that, since we know that the text we have does not follow the historical order of composition – Tennyson reordered them to create the sequence of the stages of grief he wished us to experience.

TENNYSON EXTRACTS

I passed beside the reverend walls
Of which of old I wore the gown;
And heard once more in college fanes
The storm their high-built organs make,
And caught once more the distant shout,
The measured pulse of racing oars
The same grey flats again, and felt
The same, but not the same; (LXXXVII)

To-night the winds begin to rise

And roar from yonder dropping day:

The last red leaf is whirl'd away,

The rooks are blown about the skies ;(XV)

A rainy cloud possess'd the earth,

And sadly fell our Christmas-eve.

At our old pastimes in the hall

We gambol'd making vain pretence

Of gladness, with an awful sense

Of one mute Shadow watching all.

But let no footstep beat the floor,

Nor bowl of wassail mantel warm;

For who would keep an ancient form

Thro' which the spirit breathes no more? (CV)

We paused: the winds were in the beech:

We heard them sweep the winter land;

And in a circle hand-in-hand

Sat silent, looking each at each. (XXX)

Our father's dust is left alone

And silent under other snows:

There in due time the woodbine blows,

The violet comes, but we are gone.

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones

That name the under-lying dead,

Thy fibres net the dreamless head,

Thy roots are wrapt about the bones. (II)

The wish, that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul ?
Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams,
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life ;(LV)

So careful of the type? but no.
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries, "A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go". (LVI)

The stars blindly run;
A web is wov'n across the sky;
From out waste places comes a cry,
And murmurs from the dying sun: (III)

"Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death:
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more." (LVI)

They say
The solid earth whereon we tread
In tracts of fluent heat began,
And grew to seeming-random forms,

The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
Till at last arose the man; (CXVIII)

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,
Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law –
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed –
O life as futile, then, as frail !
What hope of answer, or redress ?
Behind the veil, behind the veil. (LVI)

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die. (CVI)

Dig down upon the northern shore,
O sweet new-year delaying long;
What stays thee from the clouded noons,
Thy sweetness from its proper place?
Can trouble live with April days,
Or sadness in the summer moons
Bring orchis, bring the foxglove spire,

The little speedwell's darling blue,
Deep tulips dash'd with fiery dew,
Laburnums, dropping-wells of fire. (LXXXIII)

far away

The noise of life begins again,

And chastly thro' the drizzling rain

On the bald street breaks the blank day: (VI)

Track 2: Labyrinth

This too is a secular work which starts from the view that at least some of the experiences of people of a religious or spiritual orientation are in fact universal human experiences and so equally available to materialists. Discussion with religious friends such as James Gordon and Susanne Griffin Drake have convinced me that often we experience something very similar and that our differences are in fact about the sources and explanation of these experiences.

One such is deep calm or silence. *Labyrinth* is a journey into such a silence and then back again to the noise and chaos of our everyday world.

I had the original idea for this many years ago. It was to be an event (or perhaps in modern terms an installation) for a church in Cambridge. The visitor would come in from the noise of the street, and would follow a journey around the building, through a route lined with screens and with music at each stage, which changed, finally reaching the centre, where there would be silence, before the visitor followed a route retracing the stages back to everyday noise.

The project never happened, but recently I realised that modern media make such a journey possible mentally and with greater control of the details of the experience. This is also clearly an analogy (or perhaps a reality) of an internal journey from noise and chaos to total calm and silence and then back to normal life. I am grateful to Susanne Griffin Drake for suggesting the title to reflect this process.

Interestingly, I recently came across a description of experience, which is in some respects similar, in *La Sirena*, a short story by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, author of *The Leopard*. In this the hero imagines meeting and having a relationship with a Siren. She invites him to join her under the sea, and she describes the stages of moving ever deeper under the sea. "She told me about her existence under the sea, the bearded Tritons, the blue green caves, but she told me that even these were transitory and illusory appearances and that the truth was much deeper down, in the blind mute place of unformed waters, without a gleam of light, without a whisper"

Labyrinth begins with a collage of urban noises, to which are then added machine rhythms. Next comes a Dance drum pattern on a synthesised instrument. The chaos starts to recede, when bells are heard at a distance. The listener enters a new space, and the bells become steadily quieter and

more distorted. The sounds of small bells and cymbals are heard and the mood becomes steadily calmer. There are moments of beauty. Finally there is silence.

The listener should not be tempted to change track or switch off at this point, but should relax into this moment until bells and cymbals return quietly, and the journey back begins. Note that the first sounds are very quiet and may not even be audible if your playback is at a very low volume. Finally traffic noises are heard and grow in intensity until the listener is returned to the chaotic din of the outside world.